



## Journal of International Women's Studies

---

Volume 17

Issue 3 *Women and Gender: Looking Toward  
"Caribbeanness"*

Article 12

---

Jun-2016

# A Subtlety by Kara Walker: Teaching Vulnerable Art

Marika Preziuso

---

### Recommended Citation

Preziuso, Marika (2016). A Subtlety by Kara Walker: Teaching Vulnerable Art. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17(3), 136-148.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol17/iss3/12>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

## A Subtlety by Kara Walker: Teaching Vulnerable Art<sup>1</sup>

By Marika Preziuso<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

In late Spring 2014, the nonprofit organization *Creative Time* commissioned artist Kara Walker to create her first large-scale public installation. Hosted in the industrial relics of the legendary Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn, Walker's *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* was as controversial as it was revered. The powerful presence of the installation, coupled with its immersion in historical consciousness, makes *A Subtlety* rich in educational value. This article engages in a comparative reading of *A Subtlety* in the light of female writers and thinkers from the Caribbean, but also incorporates some of the generative questions Walker's installation has provoked my students to ask. I especially engage questions on how to unravel the mixed metaphors that make *A Subtlety* the artistic embodiment of the textured experience of the African diaspora, with its complex history, cultural hybridity and transnational ramifications. While Walker's installation seems to sustain its many layers of meanings through both form and content, the (mostly white, US-born) students in my class have responded to it in a range of critical ways that pointed especially to their emotional and critical response toward female Blackness, and reflections about the artist's responsibility toward her intention. The article reflects on the inherent possibilities for teaching *A Subtlety* and other forms of what I consider "vulnerable art," which at its best helps to channel our collective and personal discomfort in effective, healing ways.

**Keywords:** Caribbean, comparative literature, contemporary art, feminist postcolonial theory, sugar, vulnerability, women's literature.

### Introduction

This article stems from one of the intersections among visual art, literature, and critical and creative thinking, around which I developed a course, *Women's Literature in International Perspective*, at my institution in Spring 2015. In this course I paired a selection of contemporary women writers and visual artists from the Caribbean, Western Africa and the Middle East who reside in Europe and the USA.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Acknowledgments:* I am thankful to friend and colleague Laura Reeder, whose "Instructional Resource" published in the Spring 2015 issue of *Art Education* ignited my interest in the pedagogic possibilities of Kara Walker's *Sugar Baby*. I am also indebted to the students in the *Women's Literature in International Perspective* course in the Spring 2015, for being a continuous source of intellectual stimulation and wonderful creative insights, which have made the thinking and writing of this article not only possible, but organic to our collective thinking during the semester.

<sup>2</sup> Marika Preziuso is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Liberal Arts at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (MassArt). Marika holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the Caribbean Diaspora and a MA in Gender, Society and Culture, both from the University of London, UK. At MassArt she teaches courses on diasporic and multicultural literature, Latin American and Caribbean literature. In 2014, Marika co-edited the collection of essays, *Migrant Identities of Creole Cosmopolitans*, published by Peter Lang, with Dr. Nirmala Menon, India Institute of Technology (IT). Contact email: mpreziuso@massart.edu

Pedagogies of comparing, contrasting and integrating knowledge and practices in different art forms are particularly rewarding when the subject matter is what our class defined as both “sticky” and “fertile,” and when an inattentive eye easily misses the subject’s complexity. To unravel that complexity, we employed cross-disciplinary approaches and kept our minds and hearts open. My students are visual artists, which also makes them art viewers and critics. Many are also future art educators, so they wish to teach future generations how to be empathetic and engaged artists and to integrate values of equality, cultural competency and social justice within the fabric of the art they create.<sup>3</sup>

This article integrates my interpretation of Kara Walker’s 2014 installation *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, in light of works by feminist critic Audre Lorde and Guyanese poet Grace Nichols, with my students’ responses to the installation’s multiple layers of meaning.

Kara Walker is an African-American artist and faculty member in Rutgers University’s MFA program. Her signature work has been the series of grotesque, daunting narratives she creates from black cutout silhouettes drawn from 19<sup>th</sup>-century history-book illustrations to represent the antebellum South’s racist brutality. Through both ingenuity and disturbing beauty, Walker’s silhouettes expose scenes of violent sex and the lashing, mutilation and lynching of Black bodies.



Kara Walker’s Art Installation at MoMA—“Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred b’tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart,” 1994. MoMA website <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/110565>. Accessed August 3, 2015.

In Spring 2014, the nonprofit organization *Creative Time* commissioned Walker to create her first large-scale public installation. Hosted in the industrial relics of the legendary Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn, Walker’s *A Subtlety* interacted with the building, its surroundings and its history in complex ways, by virtue of its physicality and the artist’s powerful intention.

---

<sup>3</sup> Most students in this class are white women from New England. While this information does not directly pertain to the arguments made in this article, I must commend my students’ capacity for intellectual and emotional engagement with the artists and writers we studied, whose experience they may not share.



Photograph inside Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*, Brooklyn, New York, June 6, 2014. Photograph by Eric Konon. Courtesy of Eric Konon.



*Get Me Before I'm Gone*, photograph inside Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*, Brooklyn, New York, May 31, 2014. Photograph by Several Seconds. Courtesy of Several Seconds.

*A Subtlety*, or *The Marvelous Sugar Baby*, comprised a gigantic woman-sphinx, evoking any (female) body that toiled in the global plantation south. The sculpture was made out of 80 tons of confectionery sugar coated over a foam structure, and was surrounded by a number of life-size sculptures of “attendants” made out of molasses-covered resin.

In this article I articulate how Walker's *A Subtlety* defies the risk of reproducing the spectacle and objectification of the Black female body and the history it contains, by creating a space in which viewers can engage with the “vulnerability” of the subject matter, and consequently, with their own vulnerability.

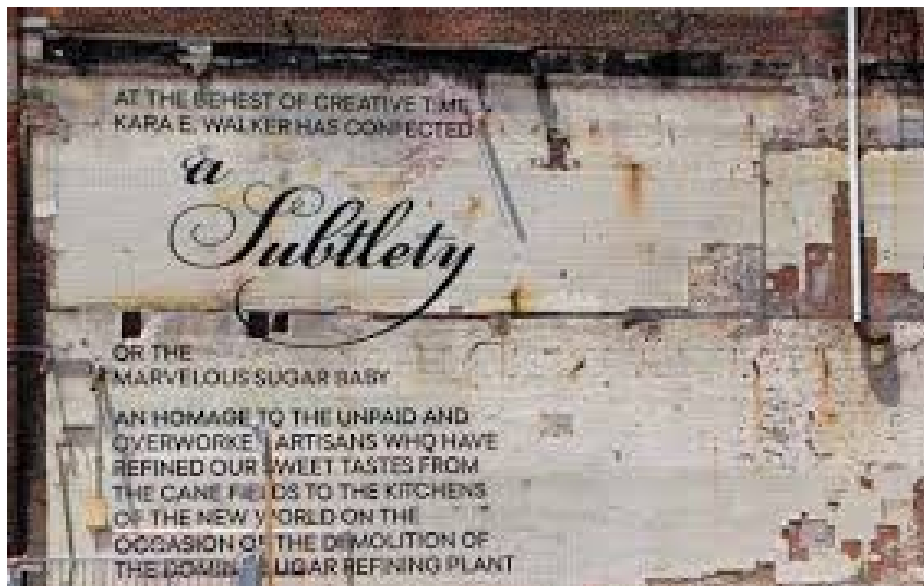
### What do I mean by ‘vulnerability’ in the context of Walker’s installation?

I argue that vulnerability finds its way into the formal aspect of *A Subtlety*, its historical framework, and the multiple layers of hypertext created around the installation, which includes social media, a digital project in the *Creative Time* website, and surveillance-like techniques by Walker.

Vulnerability in the arts, as in life, works best when modeled upon. Artistic vulnerability is a productive strategy when it is neither the simple exposure of the artist’s emotions, such as anger, fear, or pain, nor demanding of the artist to relinquish the meaning of her work entirely to the viewers’ emotional response to it. Creating “vulnerable art” is a brave enterprise, and must generate meaningful questions as well as answers. An artist taking risks by tackling an uncomfortable subject and making herself vulnerable to it, and to her viewers, gives those viewers space to wrestle with their own response to it: to open up to it, or to cringe and act out their own discomfort with it.<sup>4</sup>

### What are the sites of vulnerability in Kara Walker’s *A Subtlety*, and how do they work?

*A Subtlety* offers neither flyers nor explanations to the visitors, except for the title and subtitle of the installation, which appear on a side wall at the Domino Factory entrance.



“At the behest of *Creative Time*, Kara E. Walker has confectioned *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*: an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant.” (Photo courtesy of Laura Reeder)

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting examination of vulnerability within the context of pedagogy in art education, see Bogart, Anne. “Magnetism.” *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. New York: Routledge, 2007. 65. Bogart cites, among others, Judith Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519–22. JSTOR. 29 Nov. 2013, and John Dewey’s seminal text *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books (1937).

In the inscription Kara Walker describes her work as a sugar “confection,” the product of an artful candy-maker. Exhibition chief curator Nato Thompson explains the historic connection in the installation’s title: “Subtleties were sugar sculptures that adorned aristocratic banquets in England and France in the Middle Ages, when sugar was strictly a luxury commodity. These subtleties, which frequently represented people and events that sent political messages, were admired and then eaten by the guests.”<sup>5</sup> In her review essay of the exhibition, Valérie Loichot aptly argues that the confectionary meaning of “subtlety” is overshadowed by our everyday use of the term that refers to something delicate, discreet, nice, and refined.<sup>6</sup> Walker, however, brings back the intoxicating history of “subtlety” by reinventing the term as a euphemism to describe the excessive size of the figure, and as a symbol of the monstrosity of slavery.<sup>7</sup>

Loichot also argues for a symbiotic rapport between the installation and the surrounding space: “Through the unapologetic and excessive presence of sugar, the factory and Walker’s art enter into a symbiotic relationship, not only environmental but also deeply historical.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Jerry Saltz, in his review of the installation, writes that the Domino building, “where layers of history are caked on the walls with molasses, this place where brown sugar was turned white, multiplies the lurking meanings in Walker’s work.”<sup>9</sup>

To add to the interweaving of the art and the space, *A Subtlety* was dismantled at the end of last summer, along with the factory itself. This also gave the work a sense of ephemeron and magnified the viewers’ expectations since its opening. It also informed the experience of the installation and provided a lingering bittersweet aftertaste of it, which was, as I will argue below, intentionally desired, and even manipulated, by the artist.

To create the Sugar Baby figure, Walker layers at least three archetypes of Black womanhood into it—the Mammy/Aunt Jemima, the obeah woman/witch, and the hyper-sexualized Black woman—in a continuum from slavery through contemporary culture. In these images the Black female body is read as object and implicitly caricatured, without any room for its ambiguity nor any possibility of its response to the objectifying gaze.

Yet the Sugar Baby is far from a caricature of any of these figures. Her position reminds us of that of a sphinx. As Walker explains in her interview with Audie Cornish on NPR:

She sits somewhere in-between the kind of mammy figure of old and something a little bit more recognizable—recognizably human... [She has] very full lips; high cheekbones; eyes that have no eyes, [that] seem to be either looking out or closed;

---

<sup>5</sup> Nato Thompson, “Curatorial Statement” <http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/curatorial-statement/>.—quoted in Valérie Loichot, *Kara Walker’s Blood Sugar: A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, *Southern Spaces*, July 8, 2014. [http://southernspaces.org/2014/kara-walkers-blood-sugar-subtlety-or-marvelous-sugar-baby#foot-note12\\_oo518wu](http://southernspaces.org/2014/kara-walkers-blood-sugar-subtlety-or-marvelous-sugar-baby#foot-note12_oo518wu). Accessed May 22, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Valérie Loichot, *Kara Walker’s Blood Sugar: A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, *Southern Spaces*, July 8, 2014. [http://southernspaces.org/2014/kara-walkers-blood-sugar-subtlety-or-marvelous-sugar-baby#foot-note12\\_oo518wu](http://southernspaces.org/2014/kara-walkers-blood-sugar-subtlety-or-marvelous-sugar-baby#foot-note12_oo518wu). Accessed May 25, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Valérie Loichot, *Kara Walker’s Blood Sugar: A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, *Southern Spaces*, July 8, 2014. [http://southernspaces.org/2014/kara-walkers-blood-sugar-subtlety-or-marvelous-sugar-baby#foot-note12\\_oo518wu](http://southernspaces.org/2014/kara-walkers-blood-sugar-subtlety-or-marvelous-sugar-baby#foot-note12_oo518wu). Accessed May 25, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Valérie Loichot, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Jerry Saltz, “Kara Walker Bursts Into Three Dimensions, and Flattens Me,” *Vulture*, May 31, 2014, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/05/art-review-kara-walker-a-subtlety.html>, quoted in Valérie Loichot, *op. cit.*

and a kerchief on her head. She's positioned with her arms flat out across the ground and large breasts that are staring at you.<sup>10</sup>

According to Greek mythology, the sphinx was a half-human, half-animal creature in control of the power of knowledge, who devoured the travelers who could not answer her riddles. As a sphinx, the Sugar Baby not only presents a position of power and authority, but also its symbolism resonates particularly with the history of the Caribbean. Europeans perceived the Carib Indians as cannibalistic, while, within the sugar economy, both the sugar factories and the life on the sugar plantations conspire to wear out and devour the bodies and identities of the cane workers.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Women's Literature in International Perspective* class, we discussed *A Subtlety* after reading the novel *The Farming of Bones* by Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, in sync with "The Price of Sugar," the short essay Danticat wrote for the *Creative Time* website. Both texts make a case for the loss of lives, collective memories and voices that comprise the history of sugar across the Caribbean. Danticat's participation in Walker's multimedia project also attested to the contemporary global significance of the history of sugar and to the importance of integrating varied artistic forms across the Americas to perform this history in both radical and personal ways.

The most insightful moments in the classroom, however, took place when we paired the Sugar Baby with another "marvelous" and seemingly "unfitting" female subject of Caribbean descent: the "fat Black woman" in the homonymous poetry of Grace Nichols.<sup>12</sup> Most students were in awe at the language of these poems, lingering on the physical attributes of this Afro-Caribbean woman, and emboldened by her unapologetic presence:

## Invitation

*Come up and see me sometime  
Come up and see me sometime  
My breasts are huge exciting  
Amnions of watermelon—your hands can't cup  
My tights are twin seals—fat slick pups  
There's a purple cherry  
Below the blues of my Black seabelly  
There's a mole that gets a ride  
Each time I shift the heritage  
of my behind*

*Come up and see me sometime.*<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Audie Cornish, *Artist Kara Walker Draws Us Into Bitter History with Something Sweet*, interview on NPR, May 16, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2014/05/16/313017716/artist-kara-walker-draws-us-into-bitter-history-with-something-sweet>. Accessed May 22, 2015

<sup>11</sup> One poignant reference to the destroying power of the sugar plantations is in the very title of Danticat's novel *The Farming of Bones*. Here the "bones" are those of the cane workers, as many of them feed the soil with the exhaustion of their toil, and after death with the substance of their bodies.

<sup>12</sup> Grace Nichols, *The Fat Woman's Poems* (London: Virago Press, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Nichols, *op. cit.*, p.13.

Through humor, confidence *and* vulnerability, the fat Black woman reveals herself as a fully-fledged being who invites others to forge a connection between her seduction and her ancestral “baggage.” This seemingly ambivalent stance is further explored in the poem *The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping*, where we see the narrator in a public space negotiating her experience of displacement and exile in London in a tongue-in-cheek yet painfully touching confrontation:

### **The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping**

*Shopping in London winter  
is a real drag for the fat Black woman  
going from store to store  
in search of accommodating clothes  
and de weather so cold  
Look at the frozen thin mannequins  
fixing her with grin  
and de pretty face salesgals  
exchanging slimming glances  
thinking she don't notice*

*Lord is aggravating*

*(...)*

*The fat Black woman curses in Swahili/Yoruba  
and nation language under her breathing  
all this journeying and journeying*

*The fat Black woman could only conclude  
that when it come to fashion  
the choice is lean  
Nothing much beyond size 14*<sup>14</sup>

One of my students commented that the ambivalent feelings the woman in the poems exudes invite readers to make themselves vulnerable. Another wrestled with the meaning of the title of Nichols's collection: “From the title of the collection I assumed that the poems were about celebrating diverse body images—instead every part of the title meant something more profound, a search for a sense of self, self-empowerment. The title was intentionally deceiving.”<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, many students found it initially harder to recognize a similar intent of empowerment via vulnerability in *A Subtlety*. Unlike the fat Black woman, the Sugar Baby neither shares her experience nor expresses her desires or frustrations. Like a sphinx, she holds onto the solution to her riddle.

Playing these two artists from the African diaspora against each other generated insightful class discussions. While *A Subtlety* seems to sustain its own contradictions that respond and amplify the charged history of sugar, my students questioned the artist's responsibility toward her art.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> In the interest of my students' privacy, I will omit the names of those whose views are included in this article.



They were concerned about the effectiveness of the installation's reception, in terms of whether and how the viewers would go past the Sugar Baby's "marvelous spectacle" to understand this creature as resisting a history that is responsible for Black women shifting between the two edges of hyper-visibility and absolute invisibility. After all, we argued, the insistence on exposing mostly (but not exclusively) white viewers to a huge visual representation of an Afro-Caribbean female body may reproduce the association of Black Woman with flesh and appetite, cannibalism, and hyper-sexuality. The profuse availability of video footage of the Sugar Baby on the Web—some of which records selfies taken beside her vulva—further proved that the audience had either not gone past the shock effect the installation might have produced in them or were staging that very effect.

Yet we also asked whether it is the responsibility of the viewers to connect what they see with the artist's intention, and, by doing so, to move past the shock effect to make sense of their own discomfort and vulnerability: Who is accountable for conveying the artist's intention in a way that prevents the viewers from becoming, albeit involuntarily, complicit of the spectacle the piece is supposed to refute? How, we wondered, can society *see* Black women as whole beings, when art risks highlighting their physicality above any other features? Grace Nichols seems to answer these questions when she writes about her desire to make poetry that exceeds a specific form of visibility afforded to Black women—the "long-suffering woman:"

In the early days when I first started reading my poetry, a few women who wanted to know why I didn't write about or focus on the "realities" of Black women in Britain—racial discrimination, bad housing, unemployment—and this poem came as a response to that:

Of course when they ask for Poems about the realities of Black Women  
they want a little Black blood  
what they really want  
at times  
is a specimen  
whose heart is in the dust (...) <sup>16</sup>

The "realities of Black women" demanded from Grace Nichols are only deceptively "real." Rather, they reproduce for the viewers/readers a flat, bi-dimensional, uncomplicated silhouette-like image void of contradictions and ambiguities.

What appears to be missing in the representations Nichols rebuts is the act of negotiating the space between outside oppression and self-objectification, visibility and invisibility. Audre Lorde, another Caribbean-American writer, poet and critic, has a wonderful rendition of this complex negotiation that affords agency and responsibility to Black women:

Most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live.  
Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do,

---

<sup>16</sup> Grace Nichols, "The Battle with Language," *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, edited by Selwyn R. Cudjoe (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), p. 283-289.

for that very visibility which renders most *vulnerable* [my emphasis], our Blackness. (...) That visibility which makes us most *vulnerable* is that which also is the source of our greatest strength.<sup>17</sup>

As Lorde suggests, the key to understanding how Black women negotiate the space between the visibility and the invisibility for which she blames racism is to go to its historic and cultural roots and acknowledge the vulnerability that lives in that space. This recognition may lead to strength and self-love. Kara Walker's *Sugar Baby* locates herself at this crossroads: the artist does not disavow the historic trauma and personal damage the *Sugar Baby* has experienced, but she affords her the agency to not identify with *just* that history. The histories of slavery, the slave trade and the sugar trade are still visible on *Sugar Baby*'s body (among others, in her gaze, her exposed sex, and her headscarf's semiotic cues), but at the same time these are the marks of her strength: her refusal to be a victim of history.

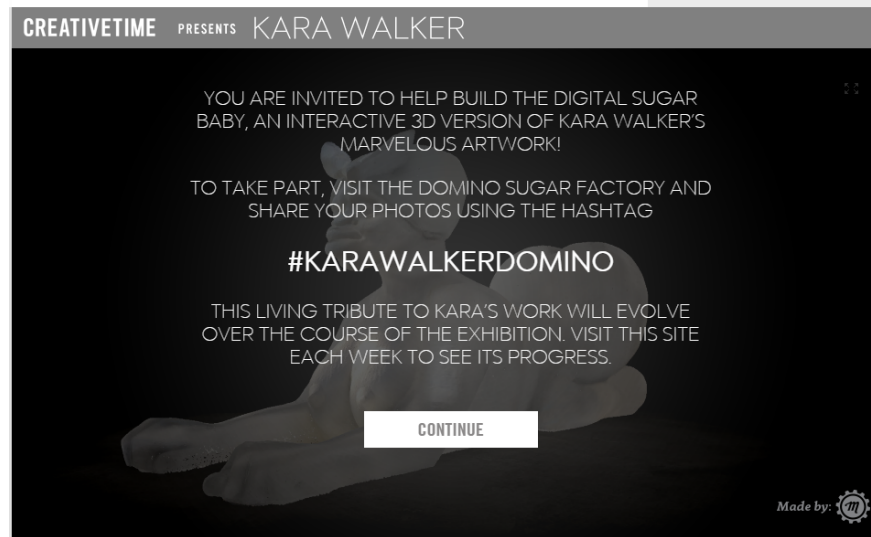


Photos courtesy of Laura Reeder, August 2014.

The installation's multi-layered significance became even more visible once the class considered the hyper-text that framed Walker's installation, of which the *Creative Time* website, with its interactive *Digital Sugar Baby* project, and the piece's afterlife were the main components.

---

<sup>17</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1987), pp. 40-44.



Screenshot of the *Digital Sugar Baby* main page. Accessed August 5, 2015.

While teaching *A Subtlety*, I have come to view it as a subtle commentary on the consumption of art as well as the consumption of black womanhood and sugar. One of my students brilliantly captured this commentary by articulating the wrestling with her ambivalent feelings about the piece:

I always try to find what the artist of the piece was trying to say, because that is what I have learned thus far in art school. Someone always has something to say with their art, and rightfully so. However Kara Walker's, *Sugar Baby*, was a different experience for me since I first saw this piece through the Creative Time's web page. What was hard to miss [about *Sugar Baby*] was how incredibly huge this sculpture was and how much material and labor was used to create this. Which then led me to think: Wow, what a huge message the artist is trying to portray (...) In the end, I realized that I was indifferent towards the piece, and that is when the piece actually shed some light. *I felt as though Kara Walker wanted the viewers to think about art just as much as she did about it, and not just about the unpaid and overworked artisans of the Domino Sugar factory* [my emphasis]. I found her work very intriguing and it truly helped myself to think more about any type of art.

Other students shared a similar experience: an initial shock at the installation's enormity, followed by their expectations of an equally sized, unambivalent message. They had to unlearn their own expectations as viewers, and maybe also their mode of critique of art by staying with many feelings at once: discomfort at the ambivalent metaphors of the installation, sadness at the history it represented, frustration at the mixed reception it received. Only after they stayed long enough within this space of vulnerability could they shed some light on the art itself.

I argue that the vulnerability of *A Subtlety* lies precisely in its offering of an unanswered riddle for us viewers: as deeply political, interactive and self-reflective, it is a generous invitation to wrestle with its possible meanings, but in the process it makes us come to terms with our own perceptions on, and consumption of, sugar, Blackness, history and, ultimately, art.

In a recent conversation with director Ava DuVernay, Walker highlighted the interactive nature of *Sugar Baby*. The artist revealed that the audience's reaction to the installation had been expected, and ultimately incorporated into the meaning of the work:

I put a giant 10-foot vagina in the world and people respond to giant 10-foot vaginas in the way that they do. It's not unexpected. Maybe I'm sick. Sometimes I get a sort of kick out of the hyper essay writing, that there's gotta be this way to sort of control human behavior. [But] human behavior is so mucky and violent and messed-up and inappropriate. And I think my work draws on that. It comes from there. It comes from responding to situations like that. I've got a lot of video footage of that [behavior]. I was spying.<sup>18</sup>

In the same conversation at *The Broad*, the artist added that she would incorporate the footage of the audience's response to *A Subtlety* into another work, which builds upon the temporal and deeply emotional nature of the installation, and is going to be called *An Audience*: "I'm trying to understand the sort of absence of the piece through the beginning stages, with people viewing it, then viewing themselves viewing it, then viewing each other viewing it, then its demise."<sup>19</sup>

What was interesting about the excerpts of the footage the artist recorded<sup>20</sup> is that it documents not simply what Ava DuVernay called "an outpouring of inappropriateness"<sup>21</sup> from the visitors, but rather interactions of all kinds: kids playing with molasses, families posing for group shots in front of the sphinx, couples touching its side and marveling at the texture. The video focused (perhaps intentionally) on the full range of responses from a predominantly non-white and intrigued but respectful audience.

By creating a space for viewers to interact with the piece and explore a wide range of emotional responses, including their recording of each other's impressions, Kara Walker enables viewers to activate their personal vulnerable space around it. Furthermore, the Domino Factory, the *Creative Time* website, and the many YouTube videos become a public space in which a variety of feelings can be both performed and processed in ways that may be cathartic and healing, and that, in the best cases, reveals what Gloria Anzaldúa calls "a tolerance for ambiguities."<sup>22</sup>

Finally, as any teacher will know, vulnerability builds upon mutual trust. I argue that the audience of *A Subtlety* responded more readily to the call for vulnerability because they were invited to contribute to the installation's meaning instead of acting as either an objectifying gaze or oblivious pawns in the artistic matrix. The installation's ambivalence of possible readings and roles being played (between observed and observer, object and subject) is precisely what makes *A Subtlety* an example of vulnerable art.

Interestingly, this ambivalence and vulnerability are also inherent in the charged history of sugar as it exists at the cusp between the corruption of so-called "western civilizing mission" and the West's desire for purity and sweetness (symbolized by the bleaching of the cane, and the elitist

---

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Carolina Miranda, "Kara Walker on the Bit of Sugar Sphinx She Saved, Video She's Making," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-kara-walker-on-her-sugar-sphinx-the-piece-she-saved-video-shes-making-20141013-column.html#page=1>. Accessed May 22, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Carolina Miranda, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> Excerpts from the video are available at <http://flavorwire.com/489699/new-kara-walker-video-shows-a-subtlety-was-performance-art-all-along>.

<sup>21</sup> Carolina Miranda, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), p. 79

status of sugar across history). This subtle ambivalence requires some effort to comprehend: one must pay close attention to see the bitter behind the sweet.

Similarly, some readers of Nichols's *Fat Black Woman* poems may experience discomfort when exposed to the unapologetic celebration of "fat" and "Black" as associated to "woman." For instance, while reading one of Nichols' poems in class, a student shared her discomfort at critically analyzing the narrator's experience of oppression, given that they were so distant and more traumatic than her own as white middle-class American women. Yet the reading of these poems became an opportunity for my students to examine honestly their own difference from the narrator's life, body and sense of self. Such healthy distance allowed for a fresh examination of the expansiveness of the poems' vocabulary, as well as their rich symbolism. In the poems, "fat" can mean abundance vs. scarcity, "Black" is polychrome, and "woman" is too much to be "cupped" by male hands. The students' self-examination of vulnerability illuminated the existing resonances across the differences from the Fat Black Woman, which ultimately provoked a deeper, more conscious analysis of the poems.

The vulnerability of the work of Kara Walker and Grace Nichols is a function of both their grounding in complex histories and the creation of a space of trust where audience, readers and artist can acknowledge their discomfort, locate the vulnerability that lies underneath it, and only then activate the multilayered narratives that unfold via these black female figures. This art contributes toward the development of an expansive consciousness in us viewers and readers—one that allows for a productive "tolerance for ambiguities" in ourselves, in others, in art, and in life.

## Bibliography

### Texts

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Toward a New Consciousness." *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Danticat, Edwidge, *The Farming of Bones*. New York: Soho Press, 1998.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Berkeley, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1987, p. 40-44.
- Nichols, Grace. "The Battle with Language." In *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, edited by Selwyn R. Cudjoe. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990, p. 283-289.
- Nichols, Grace. *The Fat Woman's Poems*. London: Virago Press, 1984.
- Reeder, Laura. "Kara Walker: Subtlety as a Big Idea." *Art Education*, January 2015, p. 51-58.

### Online Resources

- Cornish, Audie. "Artist Kara Walker Draws Us Into Bitter History With Something Sweet." Interview on NPR, May 16, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2014/05/16/313017716/artist-kara-walker-draws-us-into-bitter-history-with-something-sweet>. Accessed May 22, 2015.
- "Creative Time Presents Kara Walker." *Creative Time* website. <http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/> Accessed April 24, 2016.
- Herman, Alison, "New Kara Walker Video Shows 'A Subtlety' was Performance Art All Along," *Flavorwire*, November 20, 2014. <http://flavorwire.com/489699/new-kara-walker-video-shows-a-subtlety-was-performance-art-all-along>. Accessed August 5, 2015.
- Loichot, Valérie. "Kara Walker's Blood Sugar: A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby." *Southern Spaces*, July 8, 2014. [http://southernspaces.org/2014/kara-walkers-blood-sugar-subtlety-or-marvelous-sugar-baby#footnote12\\_oo518wu](http://southernspaces.org/2014/kara-walkers-blood-sugar-subtlety-or-marvelous-sugar-baby#footnote12_oo518wu). Accessed May 25, 2015.
- Miranda, Carolina A. "Kara Walker on the Bit of Sugar Sphinx She Saved, Video She's Making." *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 2014. <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-kara-walker-on-her-sugar-sphinx-the-piece-she-saved-video-shes-making-20141013-column.html#page=1>. Accessed May 22, 2015.